



NOTES

Whole Body Barefoot

TRANSITIONING WELL TO MINIMAL FOOTWEAR

BY KATY BOWMAN M.S

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KEY POINTS

Feet Must Move

Take your shoes off!

Transition Wisely

Listen to your body.

What are Minimal Shoes?

Flip-flops don't cut it.

The Right Question!

What am I doing every day that creates this?

You Are Not Special!

What works for everyone will work for you. You must move.

"I'm sure a lot of people probably anticipate that a minimal footwear book by the author of multiple books on natural movement and foot health would probably go something like "Minimal shoes are amazing. We should all be wearing them all the time and we'd all be healthier. The end."

Surprise! You will not find such a broad-stroke recommendation here. In fact, I'm writing this book because the opposite might be true: an incautious change to minimal footwear could very easily result in injury and further disease. I am, of course, a huge fan of minimal shoes, and I do think that everyone should be working towards eliminating conventional shoes from their closets. However, wearing minimal shoes without creating or prolonging injury and disease can require hundreds of steps (pun intended) along the way."

-Katy Bowman from Whole Body Barefoot

Whole Body Barefoot is one of the first books I read by the amazing biomechanist Katy Bowman. Since then I've read all of her books and they are quite simply the best books on movement I've ever read. I'm now studying Katy's restorative exercise course so I'm taking these notes to help me (and you) remember the key ideas from her books. I've studied movement and exercise since school and nobody challenges the status quo more than Katy. I'm totally in when it comes to a more movement-based life and hopefully at the end of this note you will be too. Whole Body Barefoot is an invaluable guide to taking the first steps towards changing your environment (A.K.A. the environment that your foot exists in ...all day) for greater total body health. This book is all about transitioning well into minimal footwear and Katy makes sure we understand why we should care about minimal footwear and why it should be of interest to us to get our feet out of traditional rigid, heeled shoes and into the much more flexible, unhealed minimal shoe. She also really hammers home the importance of transitioning wisely.

Your foot is a biomechanical masterpiece. In just about every one of her books Bowman mentions the foot and its 33 joints and 26 bones. Leonardo da Vinci once said, "The human foot is a masterpiece of engineering and a work of art". I've heard my Anatomy Trains Structural Integration Teacher Tom Myers refer to conventional shoes as 'foot coffins' or 'foot desensitization chambers'. For cultural and safety reasons we have taken these masterpieces of engineering and placed them in desensitization chambers, and as a result our feet aren't doing so well. And neither are the rest of our bodies. So how do we get our feet stronger, more mobile and healthy on the cellular level?

Feet Must Move

Wearing a minimal shoe can help more of your body to move more. When your foot is stuck in a conventional shoe your foot is restricted in how much it can move. Your feet would look very different today, if from your day of birth you had never put your feet in conventional shoes and had never had to walk over unnatural flat surfaces (aka man made flat surfaces). Poor movement of the foot created by restrictive conventional shoes and a lack of natural movements has created feet that don't move very well. As a result not only do our feet move poorly but our knees, hips and backs start to suffer as well. Problems of these other areas of the body often require the movement of the foot to be restored before they themselves can heal. It all starts in the foot.

While reading Whole Body Barefoot I was also reading Nassim Taleb's fascinating book 'Anti-fragile' and I love how this quote from Taleb's book directly connects with Katy's ideas. *"Finally, an environment with variability (hence randomness) does not expose us to chronic stress injury, unlike human-designed systems. If you walk on uneven, non man-made terrain, no two steps will ever be identical—compare that to the randomness-free gym machine offering the exact opposite: forcing you into endless repetitions of the very same movement. Much of modern life is preventable chronic stress injury."*

Nassim Taleb, from Anti-Fragile

I enjoy how well this illustrates the point that when we expose our feet (and bodies) to a huge variety of uneven natural surfaces we are significantly reducing the risk of chronic stress injury. The opposite is also true: when we only expose our feet (and bodies) to flat man made surfaces we stress our bodies in the same way over and over again (and leave other parts of our bodies completely unused) increasing the risk of chronic stress injury. The human body thrives on a variety of movements and stumbles when we expose it to the same repetitive movements or even worse, no movement at all. Of course it should be mentioned here that feet that are accustomed to flat unnatural surfaces need to be introduced to the 'new' uneven natural surfaces slowly and in doses that allow the foot to strengthen without overdoing it. Strengthening the foot via activating the intrinsic foot muscles will help transition to a more fully functioning foot (See the book for the specifics of these movements).

Our feet need to move! Every one of those 33 joints needs movement to promote cellular health. Blood flow, lymph flow and nerve activation are all affected by the movements our feet do or don't get to experience. The cellular health of our entire bodies is in "the hands" of our feet... let them move.

Katy says. "But whenever we use technology—yes, shoes are technology—we pay a biological tax. For wearing shoes, we pay that tax not just with our feet but also with our entire bodies. Transitioning to minimal

footwear isn't necessary only to decrease foot disease. Our bodies cannot function optimally unless our feet are in good shape, which means we need to stop outsourcing the body's work to inanimate objects. The move towards minimal shoes is a move towards a stronger body, which in turn is a huge step (stop it with the puns already) towards whole body health"

Transition Wisely

"Research shows that minimal shoes are not safe for everyone in every situation— but research also shows that conventional shoes wreak their own havoc on the body. The element that seems to be missing from the argument is that shoes don't exist in a vacuum. Shoes and feet are in a relationship with the user and the environment, which means the physical outcome of the body that wears the shoes depends on the state of the wearer's foot, body alignment, gait patterns, frequency of movement, and most frequented terrain. A shoe can't be a problem or a solution in and of itself, and if we are going to determine what constitutes optimal footwear, we need to consider what's going on throughout the users body and life"

Most feet have been in shoes a really long time and are weak and inflexible because of it. Taking these weak, inflexible feet and demanding them to move over complex uneven terrain with no preparation is not a good idea. The feet must be strengthened with specific movements and their mobility challenged progressively over time, perhaps a lot of time (see the book for the specifics on how to do this). But it's not just all about the shoe. It's about the relationship between the shoe and the body that wears it. What is the movement history of the body? It's all about context, so transition wisely. Slowly introduce more and more, well-aligned movement to your feet, and your body.

Katy also really wants us to understand what we are transitioning to. Her book is not just about ditching the conventional shoes and donning the minimal version but also the lifestyle behaviors that will help us to feel better in our bodies. It's about understanding that our bodies require better movement for biological function and that transitioning into a minimal shoe will help us achieve this, but it is only one of many things we can do. Walking on uneven terrain in our minimal shoes is another. There is absolutely nothing natural about walking on a man made flat surface whether we do it in a minimal shoe or not. I always try to walk on natural surfaces when I am wearing minimal shoes and if I have to walk on hard man made surfaces I'll wear a slightly less minimal, minimal shoe :)

Here's some specific advice from Katy on transitioning into minimal shoes but get the book for the specific details.

"General Guidelines for Footwear Transition- When switching to barefoot or minimal footwear, give under-utilized muscle time to develop. Begin foot exercises before switching shoes, and continue the foot exercises while doing your whole-body training in less supportive shoes. Master

shoeless walking before you try shoeless running.....The better you align your feet (and your body above your feet) while exercising, the less you will overload them”

What are Minimal Shoes?

“The term minimal footwear (also referred to as minimalist footwear, or barefoot shoes) as I use it means a shoe that minimizes its alteration of natural human movement”

There are four main things that we need to look for in minimal shoes. Shoes that have a thin and flexible sole, no heel, an upper that fully connects the foot to the shoe, and a wide toe box in which our toes can move (see the book for more details). Of course if you have been wearing very rigid heeled shoes for the last 20 years of your life, you may want to start by transitioning into a shoe with a smaller heel and a less rigid sole before trying completely flat shoes.

And here are another couple of quotes from Katy to give you a little bit of a push into having a look at the shoes in your wardrobe. *“Your shoes and how you use them can limit the full ’nutritional spectrum created through each movement”* and *“Your shoes are affecting a whole lot more than your outfit—they’re capping the limits of your health”*. Want to skyrocket your health? Then prepare your feet for the move towards minimal shoes.

The Right Question!

I love what Katy says about how we go looking to fix our problems. She says we go looking for help in answering the question “How can I fix this?” When really we should be asking ourselves “What am I doing every day to create this?” Many of us go looking to fix our sore back when really it would be more beneficial to look for the behaviors that we engage in that make our back sore and to stop doing them! Perhaps you are wearing heeled shoes and your back is very sore. You could spend 15 minutes everyday stretching you calf muscles. Which would have a positive affect on the position of your pelvis and hence reduce your pain. Or you could simply take your high heels off as wearing them is making your calf muscles shorter. Better yet you could do both, take of your heels and stretch for 15 minutes everyday. Are you asking yourself the right question? Are you looking to fix the problems in your body or are you (as Katy suggests) asking yourself what you are doing on a daily basis that is creating your problems? What are you doing to create your pain? It’s a bit more confrontational as it requires that we take responsibility for our health but in the long run it is much better for us to understand how we have created our body problems.

You Are Not Special! What Works For Most People Will Work For You!

Another great quote from Katy's book: "Our prescription-oriented medical culture makes us think that we all need a different medicine for our ailments- that what works for most feet will certainly not work for our own because of our special issues. What we don't understand is that nearly all of these myriad problems are stemming from a cultural problem: There's a baseline of movement that we are all missing, and our bodies are responding in different ways to the same lack of movement. Once we restore that movement in our lives, our body restores its own equilibrium or homeostasis, eliminating the problems that can seem so unique."

I love this "There's a baseline of movement that we are *all* missing, and our bodies are responding in different ways to the same lack of movement." *There's a baseline of moment that our feet are all missing.* Our feet require this movement to function properly, to pump blood around them, to remove waste products, and to keep our nerves healthy (and so that the rest of our body (above our feet) can move well also). WE MUST ALL MOVE MORE. And we want to make sure that the movements we are engaging in are nutritious for our bodies. *"Our bodies are responding in different ways to the same lack of movement"*. How is your body responding to a lack of movement? A sore back? Sore knees! Restore the movements you require for biological health and feel your body respond over time. We really don't realize how sedentary we are! Western culture is a non-moving culture. We choose to exercise for short intense periods to try and make up for our ALL DAY lack of movement. It doesn't work! See Katy's book 'Move Your DNA' to get an understanding of the difference between movement and exercise and why we all need to move more. And no, you are not special. What works for most people will work for you. And what works for most people is restoring natural movements and loads to our movement starved bodies.

Again this makes me think of the great quote from Nassim Taleb: *"Much of modern life is preventable chronic stress injury."* YES, much of it is preventable and one of the key things we need to do to prevent the chronic stress injury is to move more of our parts more! Are you moving?

Lets finish off with some good words from Katy: "This whole book applies to you—every book I've ever written applies to you—because you have a body, and my work deals in the essential movements required for human bodies to be healthy and to thrive. You want to know which habits need modification, which exercises you need to do, and what you need to learn

with respect to what goes on your feet. You need to read, learn and do all this stuff. The end.”

Are you inspired to help your whole body by transitioning wisely into more and more minimal shoes? I hope so. Get the book if you are feeling inspired.

About the Author of 'Whole Body Barefoot'

Katy Bowman

Katy Bowman is a biomechanist and writer with a wonderful gift for making complex ideas simple and bringing movement information to life. She has an international reputation for teaching alignment and load-science and is renowned for teaching hundreds of thousands of people on the role movement plays in the body and in the world. She has an award winning podcast: Move Your DNA and her website www.nutritiousmovement.com is packed with the best kind of movement advice.

About the Author of This Move Note

Hazel Boot

Hazel has a degree in Exercise and Sports Science. She is also an Anatomy Trains Structural Integrator and a Restorative Exercise Specialist. She works with clients to improve movement and reduce pain. She loves reading and geeking out on movement books. She writes notes on the books she loves to help others learn faster.

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I hope you enjoyed the content of this note but please remember that it is not medical advice and should not be used as such.